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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the controversies surrounding the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and its use in college admissions policies. An early section reviews the history and development of the test. Next the essay reviews a series of challenges to the SAT: many argue that the structure of the examination is biased against women and minorities. Others argue that the test serves to screen out those with certain educational or economic backgrounds. The discussion goes on to look at the costs of taking the test as well as costs that some students incur in coaching and instruction and preparation time, the effect of the SAT on admissions decisions, and the failure of SAT to provide colleges with information that helps them to find candidates of high academic quality or students that will tend to complete more years of college. The defense of the exam is then advanced, namely that the SAT provides a measure of generalized ability needed for most post high school education, and that a student's background may be very diverse given that the student studies academic courses and takes mathematics classes in preparation for college. Other arguments in favor of the SAT are advanced. Seven references are included. (JB)

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Should the SAT Be a Factor in College Admissions?

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English 112
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March 28, 1991

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The SAT is probably the best known examination in America except for, possibly, the one taken to get a driver's license. Every year this test is taken by two-fifths of high school graduates as a "rite of passage" from secondary school to a level of higher education. (The College Board News: Testing 101 1) Throughout the history of the Scholastic Aptitude Test bitter controversies and questions have arisen concerning its validity, but this test has continually been used unrelentingly for years despite the unremitting attacks.

The Scholastic Aptitude Test, which has been slightly adjusted over the years mainly as concessions to women and minorities, has actually remained largely unchanged since its design in 1925. The SAT now, as when first constructed, uses multiple-choice questions to test verbal skill using antonyms, analogies, sentence completions, and reading comprehension, and to test mathematics skill using basic arithmetic, geometry, and algebra. The SAT was first administered in 1926 under the sponsorship of the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB), which was founded in 1900 by a group of elite Northeastern colleges and prep schools for the purpose of promoting a common high school curriculum for all students. To help achieve the goal of admissions standards based on the new curriculum, the board, in 1901, began to sponsor essay-type tests in Latin, history, physics, and other classical subjects which were considered

to be necessary preparation for the "rigors of college academics". (Toch 60-63)

In 1925, Princeton psychology Professor Carl Campbell Brigham was named head of a committee by the CEEB to draft an intelligence test to be used in college admissions. Brigham, who was already a notable figure in the relatively new mental-measurement movement, used the basic structure of a multiple-choice test he had helped administer to World War I recruits to help him create the SAT. These war tests Brigham had used as a source were, however, largely culturally biased and thus not actually true measures of mental ability for many taking the examination. (Toch 63)

Since that time the board has attempted to eliminate the cultural bias from Brigham's tests. However, as the number of colleges using the test grew and the number of students taking the test grew, the board became more and more reliant on the multiple-choice format until, by the 1940s, the essay examinations had been completely eliminated. Currently, now many years later, the influence and number of students taking the SAT are at their peaks. (Toch 63)

The SAT, since its inception as a national examination, has endured through a vast array of harsh comments and criticisms. "Individuals and organizations, ranging from Georgetown University's outspoken basketball coach John Thompson to mainstream educational organizations such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, have

hammered at the SAT in recent years for being biased against women and minorities, for offering colleges little predictive information not already available from school transcripts, for promoting high-school instruction that is little more than SAT prepping, for affording an unfair advantage to affluent students able to pay for expensive coaching, and for being an inappropriate measure of school performance." (Toch 63) In fact, a 1977 survey of student attitudes shows "the majority of students think that one's performance on the SAT has little to do with how well one will do in college." (Crouse 351) These arguments concerning the SAT provide a means of questioning this controversial test which so many students have taken as a supposed judge of their scholastic ability and possibility for succeeding in college.

The first matter of controversy in relation to the Scholastic Aptitude Test can be presented through the actual test questions of the examination itself. Aside from knowing the correct response to a test question, someone who takes the SAT can get the right answer by guessing, or through a process of elimination, therefore knowing what the answer is not. Thus the student is, in a sense, being rewarded for his partial knowledge. However, if the student has an exact knowledge of the subject of a question he could feasibly be "thrown off" of the correct answer. (Kemelman 80)

Ever since the design of the first SAT, there have been clamors of cultural bias in the examination, in particular that concerning discrimination towards minorities and women. Although these claims are often greatly exaggerated, they are not without a factual basis to substantiate the complaints.

For nearly a decade prior to 1982, the College Board, the nonprofit membership organization of 2,600 schools that sponsors the SAT, had refused to publish the test scores in the manner of ethnic breakdown basically for fear of further kindling the argument that whites were genetically superior to those of other backgrounds. However, in October of 1982, the College Board released figures which were possibly even worse than some had feared as blacks scored on average at least 100 points below whites and were behind every other ethnic group. The board's actual study and breakdown of the scores of "high-school seniors who took the SAT in 1981 showed that blacks scored an average of 332 on the verbal part of the test and 362 on the math, compared with 442 and 483 for whites (a perfect score would be 800 on each part). Asian Americans tested at 397 and 513, American Indians at 391 and 425, Mexican-Americans at 373 and 415 and mainland Puerto Ricans at 361 and 396." Therefore, as this study exemplifies, minorities, and blacks in particular, do not fare as well on the SAT as their white counterparts. ("The Racial Gap in SAT Scores" 110)

The question of gender has also become a matter of staunch concern in relation to SAT scores. This gender issue can be tied to claims that the SAT is discriminatory against females since boys tend to score higher on the examination than girls even though once in college, girls tend to earn higher grade-point averages than boys. (Waters 28) In fact, in 1989, a federal judge overturned a New York State scholarship program which awarded scholarships solely on the basis of SAT scores, since in doing so, it was supposedly discriminating against females. (Toch 63) Therefore, alleged discrimination between the genders and with minorities is a proposed downfall to the SAT and the College Board's claims that the examination is just to all students. (The College Board News: Testing 101 1)

Other controversies presented to the SAT concern the background of students taking the examination. The first of these involves the schism between the scores of students from religiously affiliated high schools, private high schools, and public high schools, as the scores are reported separately for these groups. (The Condition of Education 24)

Since 1981, students from private high schools have generally scored higher than students from public high schools on the SAT verbal examination. Score reports also show that students who attend independent private schools, on average, fare better on the mathematics section of the SAT than students from other educational backgrounds. In 1987, for example, students from religiously affiliated

private high schools received an average SAT verbal score of 440 and mathematics score of 469 while students from public high schools received an average verbal score of 428 and math score of 476. However, students attending independent private high schools received an average verbal score of 473 and mathematics score of 519. Therefore, when taking the SAT, students attending private high schools, in particular independent private high schools, do seem to be at a direct advantage over those students attending other types of schools. (The Condition of Education 24)

These score discrepancies can be further tied to perhaps an even more prominent relationship, that concerning SAT scores and economic background. The problem of students with inferior economic resources being at a supposed unfair disadvantage when taking the SAT is one that has troubled the creators of the examination for years. Most all recent figures indicate a clear connection between money and achievement on the SAT as most students' test scores rose along with the median family income of their ethnic group. For example, the results of the 1981 SAT scores show American Indians scoring 391 and 425 on the verbal and mathematics sections respectively, while blacks scored an average 332 and 362 on the verbal and math sections. This relationship, however, can further be related to the fact that, at the time, the median income of the American Indians taking the examination was around $20,000, while the median

income of blacks taking the examination was $12,500. ("The Racial Gap in SAT Scores" 110)

In order to correct the problems of coming from a poor background when taking the SAT, colleges could change their admissions policies to admit more students from less well-known high schools. However, this policy could in actuality only increase opportunities for upper-middle-class students living in less-privileged communities. Therefore, changing admissions policies in this manner could actually increase rather than decrease the association between socio-economic background and college admission. (Crouse 351)

Economic background can also be related to another prominent economic measure, the cost of the SAT. The average high school student spends at least $30 taking the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test once and the Scholastic Aptitude Test one or more times. (Crouse 351) Since students have repeatedly proven that taking the SAT multiple times helps to improve their scores, those from poorer backgrounds are again at a definite disadvantage when wanting to take the SAT more than once.

Aside from the notable test costs, many students also spend as much as $600 on coaching programs for the SAT in order to, hopefully, help improve their scores. (Crouse 351) However, many of these coaching programs stress success on the SAT through methods aside from those the test was intended to measure. One such costly coaching school for SAT-takers, the Princeton Review, focuses not on verbal and

math skills, but on the way the Educational Testing Service designs the questions for the examination. The Princeton Review has become a matter of particular interest since becoming famous for helping examinees boost their SAT scores 100 points or more. (Waters 28)

The Princeton Review, along with other similar schools or programs, in essence, teaches "test-wiseness" or the ability to figure out the correct response to a question without using the skill the question is designed to measure. University of Georgia psychologist Stuart Katz claims that the reading comprehension section of the SAT is, in fact, an accurate example of how students can use this test-wiseness to perform better than otherwise possible. Katz attempted to prove his accusations by administering the reading comprehension sections of old SATs to 61 honors introductory psychology students and again to a more diverse group of 111 subjects. However, in his study, only some of the students were allowed to actually use the reading passages while others were not. The results of Katz's study show that 70% of the questions were answered correctly by students who actually read the passage while 46% were answered correctly be those who did not read the passage. This, of course, indicates that a better score will be achieved when the passage is actually read, but the "no-text" group still did much better than would be expected since, if the answers were truly guessed at blindly, only 1

in 5 questions or 20% would have been answered correctly. (Waters 28)

Coaching programs, besides their monetary costs and questionable teaching methods, also fall victim to ridicule for the time they consume. In fact, many high schools "waste" valuable instruction time on SAT preparation sessions as students in these types of programs are required to memorize long lists of vocabulary words, answer SAT-type questions, and take sample tests. These long hours could be much better spent studying academic courses. (Crouse 351)

Finally, even the effects of the results of the SAT have proven to be questionable concerning any assistance or helpfulness they might provide. According to James Crouse, a professor of educational studies and sociology at the University of Delaware, Newark: "The purpose of college admissions is to make admissions decisions. The SAT can be useful to college admissions officers only if it helps them admit applicants whom they would reject using only high school records and helps them reject applicants whom they would admit using only high school records. If colleges admitted and rejected the same students, whether or not they used the SAT, the test would be redundant and could add nothing to actual college admissions decisions. This is in fact nearly the case." (Crouse 347)

Again, if colleges are concerned with academic quality or improving the number of years their students complete, the SAT fails to provide any substantial assistance. For

example, "using a high-school-rank admissions policy with a predicted freshman GPA of 2.5 as an admissions standard increases the freshman grades to an average of 2.91 and the years of education completed to 15.92; a rank-plus-SAT policy increases these figures to 2.93 and 15.93 respectively. The gain from adding the SAT is, therefore, an increase in average freshman grades of only .02 on a four-point scale and an increase in average years of educational attainment of only .01 years." (Crouse 349-350)

The SAT's effects are also of little use in determining if a student goes to college since virtually all high school graduates who want to go to college, regardless of high school record or SAT scores, are able to attend. Therefore, the SAT is more likely to have an impact on where students go to college instead of whether they go. (Crouse 352)

The final effect of the Scholastic Aptitude Test in relation to questioning its justifiablility lies in the anxiety and nervousness many takers of the SAT and their parents feel prior to and after the examination. In fact, a 1977 survey shows that 20% of students admitted being "very nervous" about taking the SAT while an additional 56% confessed being "a little nervous". (Crouse 351)

Amidst the virtual "avalanche" of criticisms and faults of the Scholastic Aptitude Test, there does lie a basis for defense of the examination. This defense of the SAT and its benefits are basically supported, however, by the College

Board itself and its claims that supposedly justify the SAT's use.

The College Board has dismissed many charges against the SAT saying that the examination is not biased, that coaching helps only a minimal amount (several years ago the College Board dropped its claim that coaching does not help at all), and that the test is a valuable source to be used with students' grades and transcripts. (Toch 63) The board also defends the claims that the SAT is fair to all students regardless of their characteristics or background, by stating that the examination is just since it is designed to comply with any curriculum and presume no particular area of past study or course work. The College Board further emphasizes the SAT's fairness by saying that the test is only a measure of generalized ability needed for most post-high school education, and that a student's background may be very diverse given that the student studies academic courses and takes mathematics classes in preparation for college. (The College Board News: Testing 101 1) Also, surveys taken by colleges do indicate that the SAT, even though the amount may be small, exhibits a greater amount of effectiveness in predicting freshman grades than the high school record alone. (Crouse 346) This small amount, however, still certainly represents worthwhile gains in student quality according to the College Board and the Educational Testing Service (ETS). (Crouse 350)

Contrary to the accusations of discrimination from many, proponents of the SAT claim that the examination helps to guarantee equal opportunity since it supposedly results "in a substantial increase in opportunities for educational advancement of low-income students by providing a credible demonstration that many such students from schools without reputations for educational excellence could succeed in the demanding academic programs of the most selective institutions." (Crouse 351) Aside from economics, the claims of discrimination against minorities, in particular blacks, are largely untrue since their lower scores are more the result of other factors than the result of a biased examination. The most prominent reason for the low SAT scores of blacks is poor schooling as many also do not take the hardest courses in school and need better test-taking skills. These problems for blacks are even further compounded when taking the SAT since most minorities reportedly do not feel at all pressured to do well on the examination. ("The Racial Gap in SAT Scores" 110)

Further, in defense of the SAT, its results do help students to better decide to which types of colleges they should apply. Students, in essence, want to apply to colleges where they can most likely be admitted and do satisfactory work. The SAT helps students to better make these application decisions through predictive information on their future college work and a means by which to compare themselves to other students. (Crouse 351)

The final, and perhaps most persuasive argument for maintaining the use of the SAT, is the alternative of not using the examination. Without the SAT, many claim there would be no real comparitive measure for students from different areas or backgrounds. Eliminating the SAT would also leave colleges almost totally dependent on high school record. This dependence, being realized by high schools, could be enough temptation in itself to lower grading standards. Seeing one school lower its standards could then lead to other schools lowering their standards as well, just to remain competitive. Thus, maintaining the SAT would supposedly prevent these "alternatives" from ever happening. (Crouse 352)

The SAT is now somewhat giving in to the many criticisms mounted against it by beginning radical revision into what is commonly referred to as "the new SAT". One of the most important revisions would be the addition of an essay portion to the examination which would be used in combination with a multiple-choice section to provide a third score, writing, to be used along with the verbal and mathematics scores. The proposed changes to the SAT would also include an elimination of the test's multiple-choice format on up to 20% of its math questions, a revamping of several other types of questions, and an added substantial measure of interpretation to the scores published by the College Board. These new revisions, after experimentation, have received an "overwhelming" response; however, the

additions to the SAT are expected to add 30 minutes to the already 3-hour long exam and increase by 50% the price to take it. (Toch 60)

The new SAT will certainly not silence all of the test's critics, many of whom feel the test is unfairly geared against women and minorities, but the new plan for the examination does seem to be a major step towards revamping the single most influential test in the nation more in coordination with problem solving and writing skills. (Toch 63) According to Robert McCabe, chairman of the College Board, there are still technical and logistical matters to be worked out, such as the question of how to score millions of essays quickly, but the new SAT could still be in use as early as the 1992-93 school year. (Toch 60)

The history of the Scholastic Aptitude Test has been one of rapid growth and development ever since its creation in the mid-1920's. Since that time, the SAT has become the most influential examination in America, as well as one of the most controversial. Amidst the scrutiny, however, the SAT does seem to have certain justifiable claims for being maintained. Now, however, aware of the abounding controversy concerning the present SAT, the College Board is in the process of constructing a new test of scholastic aptitude, one that will hopefully be accepted as a more just measure of ability, and therefore silence some of the SAT's harshest critics.

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